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FM AMEMBASSY ZAGREB
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7302
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 000167

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/14/2017

TAGS: PREL IT HR REGIONAL ISSUES

SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL SPARRING IN THE PRESS OVER ANNUAL
"FOIBE" COMMEMORATION

Classified By: AMB Bradtke for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) In a sharply worded statement February 12, Croatian President Mesic expressed "unpleasant surprise" at Italian President Napolitano's remarks at the annual February 10 Italian commemoration of ugly WWII-era massacres of Italians by Yugoslav anti-fascist Partisans. The Croatian press inaccurately reported that Napolitano blamed the events on "Slavic bloodthirsty hatred and rage" and questioned the validity of the 1947 peace treaty between Italy and Yugoslavia. Reacting to a bad translation of the Italian comments, Mesic told the press that those words had "elements of open racism, historical revisionism and political revenge-seeking." The press reported Mesic's reaction and the counter-reactions of Italian FM D'Alema and PM Prodi, to which Mesic replied (again in the press) by admitting that "our forces also committed crimes during WWII and I cannot justify crime".

¶2. (C) At a previously-scheduled February 13 meeting with Ambassador Bradtke, Mesic explained his views with some emotion, arguing that Napolitano's remarks were unacceptable and failed to take account of Italian atrocities during WWII. Mesic further noted that he would propose that a panel of history and forensic experts investigate the incidents.

¶3. (C) On February 14, Mesic advisor Tomislav Jakic told Ambassador Bradtke that Italian Ambassador to Croatia Graffini had proposed an exchange of letters between Napolitano and Mesic to ease tensions. According to Jakic, Napolitano's letter would state that he "had not said" what he said, while Mesic's reply would agree. Jakic said Mesic had declined to go along with that course of action, proposing instead that the Napolitano letter "explain" what he said. Mesic's reply would accept the "explanation."

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: The annual Italian commemoration of the massacre, during which anti-Fascist, Yugoslav Communist Partisans killed many Italians (estimates range from several thousand to more) by throwing them into naturally-occurring limestone chasms locally known as "foibe", sparks mild reaction every year. The rhetoric reflects the fact that all ethnicities in this region have an acutely honed sense of victim-hood lurking just beneath the "European" surface. Reaction this year differed in the level and specificity, but both the Croatians and Italians have too strong a stake in good bilateral relations to allow this dispute to continue for long.

BRADTKE